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V I R G I N I A W O O L F

S O M E I M P R E S S I O N S

for Craig Tapping and Julian Cahsell

INTRODUCTION

The first time I encountered the novels of Virginia Woolf, I was not reading her words, I was listening to them being read. I found her writing to be both musical and harmonic. The images that she called before my mind's eye were alive and vibrant; rich in light and colour. The pictures of Monet and Renoir immediately came to mind.

Since then, I have read more of Virginia Woolf's novels, and I know now that there are great differences between her world, and the world of the Impressionists. I think her work is more complex, and possibly more inward looking. Nevertheless, my initial reaction to her writing remains: her descriptions of life are fundamentally "impressionistic". The quotation that follows is part of what I then heard being read:

> "wrapped in the softmesh of the grey-blue morning air, which, as the day wore on, would unwind them, and set down on their lawns and pitches the bouncing ponies, whose fore-feet just struck the ground and up they sprung, the whirling young men and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd woolly dogs for a run,...."

PART I

In the years following the First World War, one of the most profound developments in the history of English Literature took place: The Victorian era had finally come to an end. In a world that had greatly changed, writers began to re-examine and expand their art. With the coming of the Twentieth Century, it was not just times that changed, but also the concept of time itself. Newton's balanced, clockwork, universe had become unreal to those people recovering from a World War.

Throughout the development of English Literature, indeed, from the time of Shakespeare, the traditional style of narrative had remained, more or less unchanged, although there were moves to and fro, from the classical to the romantic: from Shakespeare to Dickens, to the Brontës. Even the last great pre-war novelist, Thomas Hardy, did not dramatically change the basic structure of writing. His underlying intention remained the telling of a story, in the accepted linear form: with a beginning; a middle; and an end. Hardy's attitude as to the function of poetry, had changed however. He said that "the mission of poetry is to record impressions, not convictions".[2] He also said "So then if nature's defects must be looked on in the face and transcribed, whence arises the art in poetry and novel writing... I think the art lies in making these defects the basis of a hitherto unperceived beauty..."[3]

After Hardy, others came who also recognised this beauty, that had hitherto been unseen. Among them were James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and the writer who most concerns me here, Virginia Woolf. All these writers sought new ways of expressing what it was like to live in this new space and time. T.S. Eliot wrote in "Little Gidding":

> " we shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" 4

I think, in painting, a similar break with tradition had already happened: with the Impressionists.

Like the writers, these painters felt themselves outside the traditional art, which reigned supreme in the salons of their day, (even painters from the previous generation, who had painted 'sur nature' were still struggling for recognition. These included the painters of the Barbizon School, and such masters as Corot and Courbet). The first Impressionist group show was in 1874 and among those who took part were Monet, Degas, Pissarro and Renoir. The hostilities with which this, and subsequent Impressionist shows, were met, is now part of history. I will give some explanation how these new directions for painters and writers arose. I am not saying that they are the same - clearly they are not. These painters, from the late nineteenth century, were seperated from the early twentieth century writers by a world war: some of the optimisim which I find implicit in the Impressionists, had evaporated. By the time Virginia Woolf was writing, an analysis of the sub-conscious mind had been made, and the study of physchology had begun to gain some respectability in the scientific world. The painters were French, whereas the writers were Anglo-Saxon: These are just some of the divides separating them. Still, in spite of these differences, I think that a strong sympathy of vision existed between them.

PART II

Virginia Woolf's first novel, THE VOYAGE OUT, was published in 1915, this was followed by NIGHT AND DAY. But it was not until JACOB'S ROOM was published, that it became clear that she was attempting to expand her art, and reach an understanding of how to express her personal perception of the world. As we watch her style develope, it becomes more and more astonishing to discover just how acute was her perception. And the fact that she could communicate this experience so precisely, and evoke the emotion, the thought, so delicately, makes her truly the mistress of the written word.

One thing Virginia Woolf soon realised was that our experience of life does not run from "once upon a time"... to "happily ever after".... She knew that we perceive life not in "water-tight", totally understood, compartments, but rather with the blurred edges of the senses... and not a little intuition. In JACOB'S ROOM she wrote:

> "It seems that a profound, impartial and absolutely just opinion of our fellow creatures is utterly unknown... In my case life is a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us - why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing of him. Such is the manner of our

of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love". [5]

An absorption with those "sudden visions" is one of the great characteristics of the Impressionists. The truth of the moment was for them the vital truth : the fleeting effect of light : this fills their art : it is the embodiment of Blake's "eternity in an hour". As Manet explained "that is what people do not sufficiently understand, that one does not paint a landscape, a sea-scape, a figure - one paints the impression of an hour of the day". [6]

> "... the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its' greenery with purple passion flowers. And rooks dropping cool cries from the high blue. But something moved, flashed, turned an silver wing in the air. It was September after all, the middle of September, and past six in the evening. So off they strolled down the garden in the usual direction, past the tennis lawn, past the pampas grass, to that break in the thick hedge, guarded by red-hot pokers like braziers of clear burning coal, between which the blue waters of the bay looked bluer than ever". 7.

b

Whether the evening stroll takes place in September or in the Springtime, (as it does in Monet's painting), both descriptions are intense. This active intensity is beautifully balanced with moments of passive repose : from the 'soft deep green', to the 'red-hot', to the 'bluer than ever' : in this, there is the ebb and flow; the rhythm, of Monet's warm reds and cool greens.

> " I have seen him thus seize a glittering shower of light on the white cliff and fix it in a flood of yellow tones, which, strangly, rendered the surprising and fugitive effect of that unseizable and dazzling brilliance. On another occasion he took a downpour beating on the sea in his hands and dashed it on the canvas - and indeed it was the rain that he had thus painted". 8.

I think Virginia Woolf would have heartily approved of this description, by Maupassant, of Monet at work: It is transfixed with her light and intensity. Her words and phrases were used with isolated impact, each one complete in itself; with its own colour and warmth. She allowed the blending to happen in our minds: we make our own picture; recall our own memories; until the particular sensation emerges. She wrote to Roger Fry:

> " I meant nothing by the "Lighthouse". One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions - which they have done, one thinks it means one thing another, another". 9.

In response to the frescoes of cambio, which she saw in Perugia, she said:

> " I attain a different kind of beauty, achieve a symmetery by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the minds passage through the world; achieve in the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments: to me this seems a natural process; the flight of the mind...". 10.

This immediately calls to my mind the work of Monet - He, and other impressionists, had one outstanding characteristic - the way the applied paint. Generally each brush-stroke was allowed to exist in isolation: There is no attempt to merge or blend each colour; (this happens in the eye). Each brush-stroke finds its meaning in the context of the surrounding brush-strokes. And so the Impressionist painting is completed in the act of seeing. They used bolder, purer colours knowing they would create harmonies, or contrasts, in the eye of the spectator.

In 1951, Arnold Houser said that " all earlier art is the result of a synthesis, impressionism that of analysis". They did not seem to approach any subject with fixed preconceived ideas as to how something should look: They were not platonists in search of the ideal beauty

c.

Pissarro once said of the work of Monet that " It is a highly conscious art, based upon observation and derived from a completely new feeling, it is poetry through the harmony of true colours." [12] (It is worth mentioning here how Pissarro describes painting as poetry. Virginia Woolf wrote of her sister's painting, "You are the mistress of the phrase. All your pictures are built up of flying phrases). 13. Pissarro also said, in advice to young painters:

> "Paint generously and unhesitatingly for it is best not to lose the first impression... Do not define too closely the outlines of things... don't work bit by bit but paint everything at once by placing tones everywhere of the right colour and value." 14.

d.

PART III

Virgiania Woolf had the accuracy and economy of a poet in her use of words. I would say that two of her great qualities are elusiveness and delicacy. What she suggests can be as important as what she actually says. She pursued 'essences', - the 'suchness' of a particular scene - the 'smell' or 'flavour' of a moment. The quotation that follows from JACOBS ROOM is, I think, a good example of this:

> "The harsh light fell on the garden; cut straight across the lawn; lit up a childs bucket and a purple aster and reached the ledge; Mrs. Flanders had left her sewing on the table. There were her large reels of white cotton and her steel spectacles; her needle case; her brown wool wound round an old postcard. There were the bullrushes and the strand magazines; and the linoleum sandy from the boys boots. A daddy-long-legs shot from corner to corner and hit the lamp globe. The wind blew straight dashes of wind across the window, which flashed silver as they passed through the light. A single leaf tapped hurriedly, persistently, upon the glass. There was a hurricane out at sea". 15.

Virginia Woolf does not stop with the description of how something looked, but goes on to convey how it 'felt'. How it was experienced. Joseph Conrad said, when discussing creative writing that "a work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry it's justification in every line... It is an attempt to find its own forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential - their one illuminating and convincing quality, the very truth of their existence". 16.

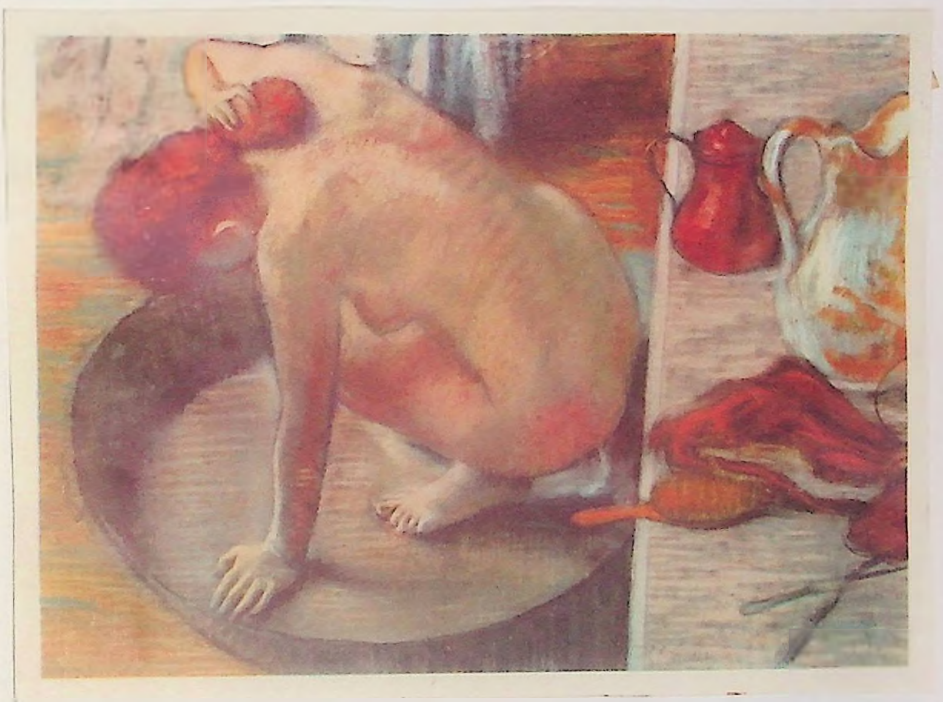
Among the Impressionists there was one man who stood out in contrast to Monet and his fiery brushwork: Edgar Degas. He stands close to Virginia Woolf insofar as they both applied an economy, and rigid discipline, to their work. Degas went as far as to say that "nothing in art should seem accidental, not even movement". 17. This might seem paradoxical coming from the man who painted race-horses and his beloved dancers, but he knew the amount of hard work and discipline that the rendering of movement demands.

Both Virginia Woolf and Edgar Degas worked in comparative solitude and they had many subjects in common. Both were concerned with everyday, personal things, houses, rooms, the clothes people wore, (subjects which might be easily bypassed).

Virginia Woolf wrote in A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN :

> "She has sensibility that was very wide, eager and free. It reponded to an almost imperceptible touch on it. It feasted like a plant, newly stood in the air, on every sight and sound that came its way. It ranged, too, very subtly and curiously, among almost unknown or unrecorded things; it lighted on overall things and showed perhaps they were not small after all." 18.

Edgar Degas knew this too, and brought it to bear on such works as his portraits of Diego Martelli and Edmond Duranty. The same can be seen in " The Tub".



e.

Here Degas has cut the painting with a shelf; a large part of the painting is devoted to small things; a porcelain jug; a hair piece and a brush. By placing the shelf thus, he has enclosed the figure, and made the activity quietly private and 'unposed'.

> "When the great clangour of the gong announced solemnly, authoritatively, that all those scattered about, in attics, in bedrooms, on little perches of their own, reading, writing, putting the last smooth to their hair, or fastening dresses, must leave all that, and the little odds and ends on their washing - tables and dressing-tables, and the diaries which were so private, and assemble in the dining-room for dinner." 19

So wrote Virginia Woolf in TO THE LIGHTHOUSE. She knew that a small, apparently unimportant thing can tell us a lot about someone and how in our responses to those small things we can know ourselves:

> "The Wheel-barrow, the lawn-mower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, dresses rustling - all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind that he had already his private code, his secret language ..." 20

f.

PART IV

I am sure Virginia Woolf often experienced the limitations of language and words. When examining this crisis, Alan Watts came to some important conclusions:

> "The very nature of conventional knowledge is that it is a system of abstractions. It consists of signs and symbols in which things and events are reduced to their general outlines,... Thus communication by conventinal signs of this type gives us an abstract, one-at-a-time translation of a universe in which things are happening altogether-at-once- A universe whose concrete reality always escapes perfect description in these abstract terms." 21

Virginia Woolf discussed this problem with the painter, Jacques Raverat. It is not too surprising that it was to a painter that she confided - (She called the room where she wrote, her 'studio', and all her early work was written standing up at a high table (an easel?)). This painter was slowly dying, and was the only one, at this time in Virginia Woolf's life, to whom she talked of her writing in such detail. She sent to him the unpublished manuscript of MRS. DALLOWAY, which was read to him a short time before his death, in 1925. She wrote to him of "the formal railway line of sentence" 22, and went on to say "people don't and never did feel or think or dream for a second in that way; but all over the place in your way." 23

Alan Watts describes this alternative means of perception as "peripheral" as opposed to "central" vision: Peripheral vision is less conscious, and takes in many things at a time; central vision is the one-at-a-time way of seeing that we use (for example) when we are reading. In 1930 Virginia Woolf wrote, " this rythm (I say I am writing the waves to arhythm, not, to a plot) is in harmony with the painters" 24 And on another occasion she wrote, " I want you to invent a name, by the way, which I can use instead of 'novel'. Thinking it over, I see I cannot, never could, never shall, write a novel. What, then, to call it?" 25

The Impressionists too, felt the limitations of conventional methods. Both Monet and Cézanne are recorded working on several canvases simultaneously. They tried to transmit a nature that was not a frozen image: the real flowing, growing, decaying nature that surrounded them. Nature as a process, not an object. The quotation that follows was written about the painter Constantin Guys by Baudelaire:

"Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, one half of art of which the other is the eternal and the immutable.. This transitory, fugitive element... you have no right to despise or do without.. They are perfectly harmonious because the costume, the headress, and even the smile... constitute a whole of complete vitality." 26

g.

CONCLUSION

I suppose one of the things we must realise is that all artists speak a common language, whether it is painting or poetry, sculpture or music; that there is an underlying creative urge to make some kind of answer to life, to nature. The closer each artist comes to the truth, the less important seems that material which holds the truth. Conrad said:

> "Fiction - if it at all aspires to be art - appeals to the temperament. And in truth it must be, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning... such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses.. and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see. That and no more, and it is everything ..."
>
> "Whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning."

That one sentence sums up, for me, what all great art is about. I would not hesitate to apply it to the art of the Impressionists, who suffered ridicule and rejection, poverty and hardship, in their attempts to present to us this elusive truth. So also would I apply it to the high art of Virginia Woolf, who shared her vision with us in spite of the traumas she suffered when the time for the publication of her novels arrived. I will conclude with one more quotation from Virginia Woolf and one more picture by Degas:

".... and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness, and what is your relation to the ever-changing and turning world of gloves and shoes and stuffs swaying up and down among the faint scents that come through chemists bottles down archader of dress material over a floor of pseudo-marble. For in imagination I had gone into a shop; it was laid with black and white paving; it was hugn astonishingly beautifully, with coloured ribbons." 28

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List of Reproductions

A. Le Moulin de la Galette, 1876. Renoir.

B. Fields in Spring, 1887. Monet.

C. London: The houses of Parliament, with the sun shining through fog, 1904. Monet.

D. The Lily Pond; Pink harmony, 1900. Monet.

E. The Tub, 1886. Degas.

F. A path through the long grass, Renoir.

G. La classe de danse, 1874. Degas.

H. At the milliners, 1885. Degas.

FOOTNOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, MRS. DALLOWAY, Triad/Panther, 1976. Page 6.

2. Poems of THOMAS HARDY, editor; T.R.M. Creighton, The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977. PXIII. (Introduction).

3. Poems of THOMAS HARDY, Appendix II P. 315.

4. The Oxford Book of 20th Century English Verse, editor, Philip Larkin. Oxford University Press, 1976, P. 69

5. Virginia Woolf, JACOB'S ROOM, Triad/Panther, 1976. P. 69.

6. John Rewlad, The history of Impressionism, Seeker and Warburg, 1913. P. 224.

7. Virginia Woolf, To The Lighthouse, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1978. P. 22

8. Rewald, P. 517.

9. Nigel Nicolson, (editor). A change in Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1923-1928. The Hogarth Press, 1977. P. 385.

10. Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf; A Biography, Harvest Books, 1972. P. 138.

11. Barbara Ehrlich White, Impressionism in Perspective, Spectrum Books, 1978. P. 65.

12. Rewald, P. 294.

13. Nicolson, P. 340.

14. Rewald, P. 456.

15. JACOB'S ROOM, P. 10.

16. Joseph Conrad; Notes on Life and Letters, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1949.

17. Jean Bouret, Degas. Thames and Hudson, 1965.

18. Virginia Woolf, A Room of Ones Own, Hogarth Press, 1977. P. 139.

19. To The Lighthouse, P. 96.

20. To The Lighthouse, P. 3.

21. Alan Watts, The Way of Zen, Pelican, 1974.

22.+23. Quentin Bell, P. 106.

24. Quentin Bell, page 155
25. Nigel Nicolson, page 221
26. Rewald, page 127
27. Joseph Conrad
28. A Room of One's Own, Page 135-139

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